

THE PURSUIT

PHILIPPIANS 3.13-14

Once a person has confessed Christ as Lord and has been sealed by the Holy Spirit as a child of God, then they are eternally secure in that status.

John 10:28 *And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand.*

Romans 8:1 *There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*

Yet being born into the kingdom is only a beginning. If a person is truly born into the kingdom, they will experience personal spiritual growth.

From the moment of conversion we are being “conformed to the image of Christ.” Christianity is not a religion nor is it an event. It is a life-long process of transformation carried out by the Holy Spirit.

Christians have been compared to pilgrims, warriors, wrestlers, competitors, and runners. Each of these calls for active involvement in some activity.

If a person settles in one location, they are not pilgrims, but settles. A warrior who dresses in combat gear but never advances to the firing line is useless to the battle. A player who shows up for every practice but never for the game is not truly a member of the team.

Can you imagine paying an entry fee to be in a race, getting all your gear together, showing up on race day, coming to the start line, putting your feet in the starting blocks, and when the gun sounds, just standing there? Every spectator would recognize in a moment that there was a serious problem.

Paul must have been an athletic youth. If not, he had the heart of a competitor. It seems that there was very little room in his heart for second best.

When his credentials and his qualifications as a Jew and as an apostle of Jesus were challenged, Paul defended himself in very concrete terms.

You can read part of these claims earlier in **Phil. 3.5**.

Phil. 3:5 *I was circumcised when I was eight days old as a member of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; (the son of a Pharisee, Acts 23.6). 6 As to zeal, I was a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness, under the law blameless.*

Message: a fiery defender of the purity of my religion, even to the point of persecuting Christians; a meticulous observer of everything set down in God’s law Book.

He was born in Tarsus, but was sent to Jerusalem to study in the most prestigious Jewish school of his day at the feet of Gamaliel. (**Acts 22.3**)

Paul was the perfect Hebrew. He would never settle for being second-best at anything, especially those things related to his faith.

Yet all of these things Paul “counted as loss for the sake of Christ.” (**verse 7**)

The greatest laurel for the Christian is not his certificate of freedom from sin and hell, not his baptismal record, not even eternal life. For the Christian, his greatest goal is to attain Christ.

Throughout his writings, Paul used sports metaphors and analogies to make his point – that a Christian does not have the option of sitting down or standing still. Sanctification or spiritual growth is a process that requires forward movement.

In this text in Philippians, Paul compares his Christian life to that of a runner committed to run the race with one goal in mind – winning!

He has a single desire – to win a gold medal – and will never be satisfied with anything less. Paul realizes that he has been privileged to see things and to know things that few men have

ever known or seen. Yet even in all of his experiences and with all his maturity, he realizes that he has not obtained the goal of becoming like Christ.

Here is Paul – arrested by Christ on the road to Damascus and directly called into the ministry of an apostle – who spent three years being taught personally by the risen Christ in the deserts of Palestine before he ever began to do ministry – saying the even through all of this he has not attained the goal of becoming like Christ.

How, then, can any person today think that they have learned all they need to learn and done all that they need to do for Christ? Christian ministry has no retirement plan!

So Paul sets his mind to the task – setting aside all the barriers that might prevent him from becoming like Christ.

He knows his past and all of the people he persecuted and imprisoned and caused to be put to death for their faith in Christ. He knows all of his achievements both academic and spiritual.

But all of those things he puts behind him.

In **verse 7**, he says that every advantage gained through worldly pursuits was a loss.

In **verse 8**, he says that everything of value in the measure of the world's standards is like dung when compared to the great prize of becoming like Christ.

In **verse 10**, there is a longing that cannot be satisfied apart from experiencing the things that Christ experienced even to the point of death.

Why death? He answers that in the next verse.

In **verse 11**, Paul says that he will pursue Christ even past the point of death so that he might also attain unto the resurrection of Christ.

Eternal life is the kind of life that continues even after passing through the veil of death and the only one who has ever done it is Christ.

In fact, the only way short of the rapture that a Christian can experience the kind of life that God has is to die.

What most people who claim to believe in Christ want is the prize – but they do not want to play in the game.

- They want the blue ribbon without running the race.
- They want the Heisman trophy without ever having been tackled.
- They want to win the Stanley Cup without ever losing a tooth.
- They want the crown of life without ever going to the cross.

We have lost sight of the goal. And very likely the reason is that we were never shown the proper goal in the first place.

We were taught that salvation was all about us receiving gifts from God – peace, love, and joy, forgiveness, and eternal life. And all you have to do to get these gifts and go to heaven is believe.

“Test yourself here. There are many professing Christians who delight in God's gifts, but not God. Would you want to go to heaven if God were not there, only His gifts?” (John Piper)

While it is true that these are gifts of salvation and that what is required to go to heaven is to believe, we need to understand what is meant by the term “believe.”

Acts 16:31 Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.

The word “believe” means much more than just a mental agreement that Jesus is Christ or that He is Lord.

In **Matt 8:29** two demons encountered Jesus and **“cried out, saying, What have we to do with thee, Jesus, thou Son of God?”**

In **Mark 1:24** another demon cried out to Jesus, **“What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are – the Holy One of God.”**

In **Acts 19:15** a group of charlatans, imitating Paul, commanded a demon to come out of a man. They even invoked the name of Jesus. The demon said to the men, **Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you?** Then the demon attacked them and caused them to flee for their lives.

James 2:19 *You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe – and shudder!*

John Piper (*Believing God*)

...we are surrounded by unconverted people who think they do believe in Jesus.

- Drunks on the street say they believe.
- Unmarried couples sleeping together say they believe.
- Elderly people who haven't sought worship or fellowship for forty years say they believe.
- All kinds of lukewarm, world-loving church attenders say they believe.
- The world abounds with millions of unconverted people who say they believe in Jesus.

It does no good to tell these people to believe in the Lord Jesus. The phrase is empty.

The phrase is empty, not because the Bible is in error by teaching it, but because we have, by our application, made it an empty phrase.

John Piper

In my neighborhood, every drunk on the street "believes" in Jesus. Drug dealers "believe" in Jesus. Panhandlers who haven't been to church in forty years "believe" in Jesus.

So I use different words to unpack what *believe* means.

In recent years I have asked, "Do you receive Jesus as your *Treasure*?"

Not just *Savior* (everybody wants out of hell, but not to be with Jesus). Not just *Lord* (they might submit begrudgingly).

The key is: Do you treasure Him more than everything?

Do you say along with Paul, **"I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord"**? (v. 8)

In **Mark 8:34–35**, Jesus said, **"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it."**

In **Matthew 10:37**, Jesus said, **"Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me."**

In **Luke 14:33**, Jesus said it this way: **"Any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple."**

Many of our problems with what it means to be a Christian come from an unclear understanding of some of the terms we use. One of those is "believe." Another is "eternal life."

John 17 is actually the Lord's Prayer. It is one of the greatest examples of the intimacy between the Father and the Son.

John 17:1 *When Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, 2 since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. 3 And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent."*

That definition should shed a bit of new light on...

John 3.16 *God loved the world like this – He gave His unique Son so that those who believed in the Son – who treasured the Son more than anything else this life has to offer – would come to know the Father as the only true God.*

Now when we read Paul's confession in Philippians 3.14, we have a better understanding of the goal of his life.

(Read verse 14.)

Paul said that he had put his past behind him and had forgotten all those things so that he could set his mind and soul and body on achieving that which was before him.

Another pastor

Quit substituting nostalgia for hope. Quit banking on some experience you had when you were nine and begin living for Christ in the now.

It's a sin to settle for adequate when God has promised us abundance.

He declared, "I press toward the mark – I am in hot pursuit of the target – that is always before me."

In World War II, fighter pilots experienced the danger of target fixation. During bombing runs, pilots could become so focused on their targets that they'd dive, drop a bomb on the target, and yet remain so intent on hitting the target that they'd fail to pull up in time. They'd end up hitting their target and killing themselves.

It is a common experienced of motorcycle riders and skydivers.

Target fixation is a process by which the brain is focused so intently on an observed object that awareness of other obstacles or hazards can diminish.

An observer can become so fixated on a target of danger that they will forget to take the necessary action to avoid it, thus colliding with the object. We become fixated on the problem or the danger.

For a biker, it might be a pothole, a tree, telephone pole, road sign, or another vehicle. For a skydiver, it might be the ground which causes him to forget to pull the ripcord to release his chute.

To avoid target fixation:

- Practice looking beyond the danger to where you want to steer. Where we are looking will determine where we go.
- Practice training yourself not to "lock" on the danger.
- Keep focusing on a positive rather than a negative goal.

- Concentrate on the job at hand and don't let yourself become distracted.

When the only thing we understand about Christianity is what God did for us, we tend to think that salvation is all about us and it becomes a simple thing to become fixated on the wrong target and to miss the one we are supposed to achieve.

Is the target of salvation...

- Deliverance from the penalty of sin
- Fulfilling the Law
- Living a good, moral life
- Getting to heaven
- The gift of forgiveness and eternal life?

All of these are part of the program of salvation, but they are not the end target. They are the gifts of God.

A.W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God*, 1948

How tragic that we in this dark day have had our seeking done for us by our teachers. Everything is made to center upon the initial act of "accepting" Christ...and we are not expected thereafter to crave any further revelation of God to our souls. We have been snared in the coils of a spurious logic which insists that if we have found him we need no more seek him.

Paul realized the ultimate goal of a Christian...

Philippians 3:14 *I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.*

Philippians 3:15 *So let's keep focused on that goal, those of us who want everything God has for us. If any of you have something else in mind, something less than total commitment, God will clear your blurred vision – you'll see it yet! 16 Now that we're on the right track, let's stay on it. 17 Stick with me, friends. Keep track of those you see running this same course, headed for this same goal.*